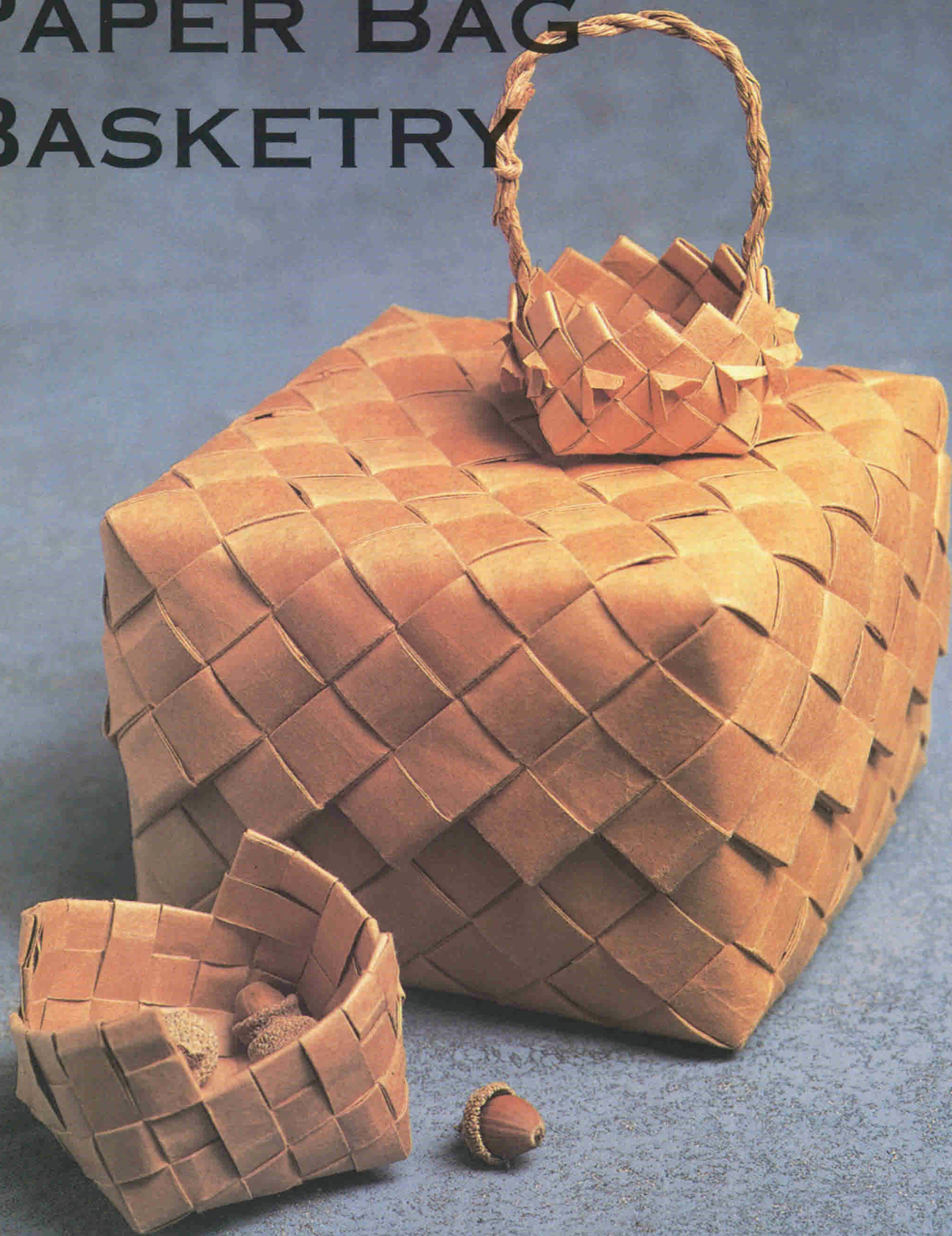


PAPER BAG BASKETRY



**RECYCLE
PAPER
GROCERY
BAGS
INTO
ATTRACTIVE
BASKETS.**

by Elaine WebbeKing

ATTRACTIVE, sturdy bias-plaited baskets can be woven from strips cut from paper grocery bags. The size and shape of the basket are up to you, but for starters, try a simple square form. You'll need four large grocery bags, two dozen spring-type clothespins, scissors, and tweezers.

Begin by carefully opening the bottom of a bag and, keeping the sides folded, cut it widthwise with a paper cutter or a straightedge and craft knife to produce five 3½"-wide paper rings (illustration 1).

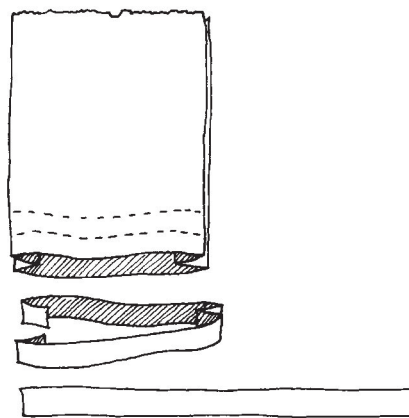


Illustration 1. Carefully cut straight strips from a paper grocery bag.

Open each ring into a long strip by cutting out the seam. Cut the other three bags in the same way.

Fold the strips in half lengthwise (printed side in), then open them and bring the outside edges to the center fold line. Finger-press these folds, fold the strip in half lengthwise, and sharply crease both sides using a ruler or table edge (illustration 2).

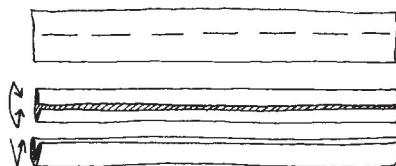


Illustration 2. Fold each strip in half. Unfold and fold the edges to the center crease. Refold on the center crease with the edges tucked inside.

Crisp, even strips are essential for an attractive basket.

Now you're ready to plait your basket. Using ten strips in each direction, plain weave (over one, under one) a square at the midpoint of the strips to form the basket base (illustration 3).

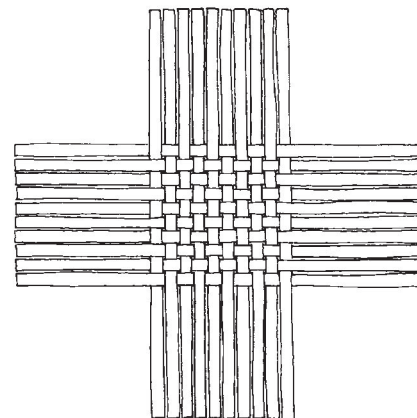


Illustration 3. Using 10 strips in each direction, weave over and under in a square.

Have the open edges of the strips face toward the center of the square to simplify making the corners later.

Pack the strips together closely and place a clothespin at each corner of the square to hold them in place. These four clothespins identify the outside edges of each side of the basket; leave them in place until the corners are completed.

Holding the square base in your lap, reach to the far side to start the first corner. Find the two center strips on the far side—they will be the two with open edges facing each other. Continuing the over-under sequence you began on the base, cross the two center strips and weave each one to the outside edge, taking care to maintain firm, even tension. This will create a small peak (corner) at the point of crossing—let it come up and if necessary, apply pressure with your fingers from the underside to make a smooth corner. Hold the strips in place with clothespins. Finish the corner by plaiting one strip from each side of the center outward to the edge until all the

strips on that side have been woven (illustration 4).

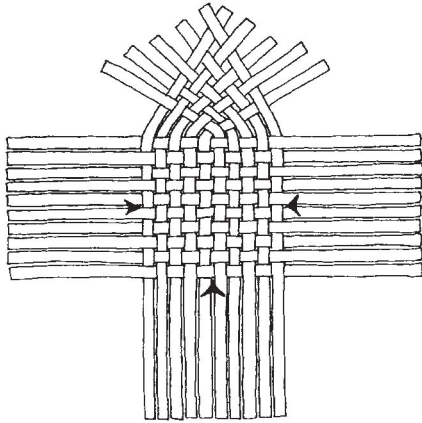


Illustration 4. Form each corner by crossing the two center strips on each side and weaving to the outside edges.

The area you have just woven will come to a point. Hold the strips in place with clothespins while you work on the remaining three sides, removing clothespins as necessary. Complete weaving between points.

At this point, you'll have a basket form. Take time to check that the corners are accurately positioned; along the base, there should be five diamonds between each pair of corners. If there aren't, unplait the basket and start again so that you will be able to correctly finish the upper edge, or lip.

Measure the height of the basket at one of the corners. Three or four diamonds high is appropriate for baskets made with 3½"-wide strips. When you've plaited your basket as tall as you want, you can secure the strips and finish the upper edge by folding the strips back on themselves—along the inside for baskets large enough to accommodate your hands or along the outside for smaller baskets. As you do this, tighten the tension by firmly tugging on each strip before folding it back on itself. Loose strips and large spaces between strips will spoil the appearance of your finished basket.

You can begin working the lip of the basket at any pair of corner strips (one behind the other). Fold

the strip in back forward, around the strip in front of it, and back down into the basket and under the nearest crossing strip. Now fold the enclosed strip (the one that had been in front of the first strip) forward over the first strip and under the nearest crossing strip (illustration 5). Continue around the basket,

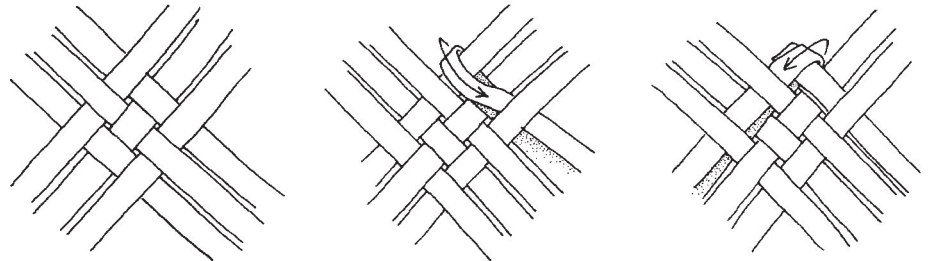


Illustration 5. Working the lip of the basket. Begin at any pair of corner strips. Fold the back strip around the front strip and back down into the basket beneath the nearest crossing strip. Fold the front strip that was crossed forward and down into the basket. Continue around the basket.

interlocking each crossing pair and tucking the ends under the nearest crossing strips.

You may cut the ends of the strips wherever you wish after weaving them under the nearest strip. To make my baskets as sturdy as possible, I weave the ends of each strip over and under, following their original paths, back down the side of the basket as far as possible, and trim the ends so that they fall under a crossing element. This can be tedious, but if you taper the ends of the strips by folding tucks in them and use tweezers to grab them, weaving is facilitated.

When you've woven in and trimmed all the ends, your basket is finished. You may leave it as is, with a slightly curved square base and rounded sides, or for a crisper look, crease the sides of the base from corner to corner so it will sit flat, and crease straight up from the corners to the upper edge. Wait until your basket is completely finished before creasing it to avoid trouble weaving in the ends.

Baskets of different sizes may be made by adjusting the number or width of the strips—from 12 to 32

for baskets made from large grocery bags. Strips should be cut four times the final width of the weaving element. The size of the finished basket depends largely on the size strips you use: wide strips for larger baskets, narrow strips for smaller baskets. For most of my baskets, I cut strips 3½" wide. Different

shapes can be made by forming the corners in different places. If you position the corners off-center, as for a rectangular-based basket, you'll have to make adjustments when finishing the top edge—only baskets with corners centered on each side will produce an even lip.

You can make a cover or lid for your basket by plaiting a shallow basket from strips cut 1/8" wider than strips used in the first basket. If your folding is precise and if the tension in both the cover and bottom basket is the same, the cover will fit the base so that the points outlining the cover's lip will match the diamonds in the sides of the base.

Properly constructed paper bag baskets are nearly indestructible. My cat has been sleeping in my very first basket for 11 years, and the basket still looks like new! ❖

Elaine Webbeking, a longtime member of the Northeast Iowa Weavers and Spinners Guild, learned to weave in 1958 to warp a loom for her mother-in-law. Though she still weaves, she devotes most of her time to papermaking, basketry, needlework, and braiding. She lives and teaches classes and workshops in Waterloo, Iowa.